

Integration of Care and Education: The Challenge in Brazil

The Brazilian government introduced a policy to integrate the administrative responsibility for day care centres for 0-3-year-olds and preschools for 4-6-year-olds into the education sector in 1996. But even after nine years, the two services are still far from being integrated. To learn more about the challenges surrounding the policy, an interview was arranged with Dr. Maria Malta Campos, professor at the Catholic University of Sao Paulo and senior researcher at Carlos Chagas Foundation. As a member of the National Association of Educational Research, she helped launch various efforts that eventually led to the 1996 General Education Law, where this policy was introduced. The interview was conducted by Soo-Hyang Choi, UNESCO, Paris, who prepared the following excerpts.¹

Profile of early childhood education (ECE) in Brazil: *The ECE service components are Day Care Centres for 0-3-year-olds and Preschools for 4-6-year-olds. Children enter primary school at the age of 7.² The municipalities are responsible for providing ECE. Since 1996, the administrative responsibility for ECE is with the Ministry of Education. The net enrolment ratio of children ages 0-3 years in day care centres was 9%; that of 4-6-year-olds in preschools about 61%.³ The gross enrolment ratio in pre-primary education or ISCED-0⁴ was 67% in 2001. Public ECE services, both day cares and preschools, are free of charge.⁵*

Choi: What was the administrative arrangement for ECE before 1996?

Campos: Before 1996, the education sector was mainly concerned with preschools, and the social sector with day care centres, with some overlapping responsibility for services for 4-6-year-olds attending either preschools or day care centres. It was a parallel system.

Ch: Who proposed the idea of integration?

Ca: The pressure came initially from civil society organisations working on women's issues and the right to education. They argued that care and education services

for young children should meet certain quality standards and that quality could be better ensured by the education sector.

Ch: What was the reaction of the education sector?

Ca: Proponents agreed on the issue of quality and the education sector's strength in ensuring it. But some were concerned that the additional responsibility for ECE could burden the sector by diverting attention from primary education, which was the sector's priority.

Ch: Did preschool teachers welcome the idea of being integrated with care workers?

Ca: They resisted the idea of having to carry out "care activities." Among care workers, opinions were divided. Some liked the idea, expecting greater recognition of their work, but others were afraid of losing their jobs by being unable to meet the required qualifications.

Ch: I guess there was some natural resistance within the social sector.

Ca: It was agreed that the education sector should take over responsibility for preschools, but not for day care centres. Given the day care centres' close link with the social sector, there was an apprehension about general weakening of the country's social policies.

Ch: With such an array of different views, reactions and pressures, I assume that Congress played a central role in making the decision. How did it react?

Ca: Many day care centres were community-based, catering for poor populations. The argument that the quality of those services for the poor should be improved was a politically viable one.

Ch: Was there any concern in the initiative to develop a more systemic structure for ECE in relation to the education system?

Ca: Day care centres⁶ and preschools existed even before the 1996 Law. What the Law did was to structure them into a system by clarifying how children's care and education needs should be catered for from birth until entry into primary school. The Law laid down ECE as the foundation of lifelong learning, by making it the first step of basic education, preceding primary and lower secondary education.

Ch: I understand that the current debate on ECE in Brazil centres upon the issue of funding. Did the Law say anything about funding?

¹This interview took place in August 2005. However, by the time this note had gone to press, there were further developments on some of the issues described in this note. First, the Fund for the Development and Maintenance of Basic Education (FUNDEB), as referred to in footnote 7, has been approved by the Chamber of Deputies and is now in the Senate, and the bill does include support for day care centres. Second, a new law has been passed to lower the entry age into primary school from 7 to 6 years. Therefore, early childhood education in Brazil now concerns those who are between 0-5 years. These latest changes are not reflected in the present article.

²In some municipalities, however, 6-year-olds are also admitted.

³Data drawn from the country's 2000 National Household Sample Survey. Data from the School Census could be different because the latter survey concerns only registered services.

⁴Educational early childhood programmes for children who are between three and the age prior to the entry into primary school.

⁵Meals are provided free as well. Community-based day care centres are also free, but they heavily rely on parents' voluntary contributions.

⁶Previously, day care centres served children 0-6 years; even now some day care centres are catering for children over 3 years as well. The age distinction by service type is not strict in reality, even though the Law is clear about the age bracket by service type.

Ca: There were general guidelines for funding basic education, but not specifically for funding preschools and day care centres, though they are part of basic education.

Ch: As day care centres were mostly funded by the social sector, at the time of integration, there should have been some mention of the transfer of funds from the social sector, for example. Wasn't there any thought given to this in the drafting process?

Ca: The Education Law could not touch upon a transfer issue that concerned another sector. At one point in the drafting process, there was a proposal to charge employers for day care services, but it was removed in the final version because of the economic crisis.

Ch: How are day care centres being financed now?

Ca: The day care centres that are integrated into the education sector are financed by local education funds. But most day care centres have not been integrated and some have only a registration agreement with the education authority. These services are community-based and still funded by the social sector. The incomplete process of integration, administratively and in terms of funding, has impeded efforts to improve the quality of day care centres, which was one of the main purposes of the integration policy.

Ch: Would the social sector continue funding them, even though they are no longer under their administrative responsibility?

Ca: I do not think so. State and municipal guidelines were issued recently on withdrawing the social sector's funding for day care centres. In some municipalities, community-based day care centres are already closed down as a result.

Ch: Is the education sector planning any measure to take on the responsibility for day care centres and see to their quality concerns?

Ca: The education sector has proposed mandatory funding for basic education, which will include ECE as one of the target areas. However, rumours have it that the proposal may target preschools, but not day care centres.⁷

Ch: Why this exclusion?

Ca: Many day care centres have not yet been integrated into the education system and recognised as educational institutions. The cost of day care centres, which is higher than that of preschools, is also another important factor.

Ch: Could it also be a reflection of the fact that the education sector's priority is on preschools, not day care centres?

Ca: Certainly. The mandatory funding proposal in question is a global proposal for basic education, including not only early childhood but also primary and secondary education. So there is tension among the different areas of basic education over access to funding. In particular, the states, which are responsible for secondary education, are

demanding a larger share of the fund, and they can put strong political pressure on the Congress. All these factors leave little room for the education sector to be concerned with day care centres that have not yet even acquired, in practice, the status of educational institutions they were granted under the 1996 Law.

Ch: What can be done to prevent day care centres from collapsing?

Ca: Federal education officials have said efforts should be made to include at least some day care centres as target services of the new mandatory funding for basic education. This will be crucial for keeping the integrated system intact. Or even if there is no systematic government funding for day care centres now, the new funding scheme should have a phased plan for day care centres. Otherwise it will become difficult, if not impossible, to ask Congress to act again for day care centres later on.

Ch: What should we now expect of the social sector?

Ca: The sector still has an important role to play in ECE. Its various social assistance programmes, such as family allowances, feeding, transportation, and health programmes for needy populations, should be designed and delivered to support parents sending young children to early childhood services.

Ch: What would be the most serious negative impact resulting from the current impasse concerning day care centres?

Ca: I am afraid that the poor will be affected the most. Their access to early childhood services is limited and community day care centres have often been the only early childhood services available to them. But these centres are now on the verge of collapse, with no support from the municipalities or the federal government.

Ch: Do you have any advice for governments that are considering the same integration policy?

Ca: In the case of Brazil, despite the problems we're facing now, everybody agrees that the decision to integrate ECE into the education sector was a good one. But the conceptual and administrative gaps between social and educational early childhood services are deep and cannot be bridged overnight. And it would certainly be naïve to believe that they will be overcome when the funding system remains divided or biased toward one or the other sector.

*Soo-Hyang Choi, Chief
Section for Early Childhood and Inclusive Education
Division of Basic Education
UNESCO, Paris*

For other issues of the series, please click:
<http://www.unesco.org/education/earlychildhood/brief>
For comments and inquiries, please contact:
Section for Early Childhood and Inclusive Education, UNESCO
7, place de Fontenoy, 75352 PARIS 07 SP, France
☎ 33 1 45 68 08 15, fax: 33 1 45 68 56 26, earlychildhood@unesco.org

⁷ The Government has submitted a bill to the Congress, which does not include the 0-3 age group in the funding scheme.